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How to fix hospital call centers to improve the patient experience, boost revenue

Written by Andrea Simon, Ph.D., Corporate Anthropologist & Founder/CEO of Simon Associates Management Consultants | August 14, 2015

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I've worked with hospitals to improve patient satisfaction rates for years and we've seen that the first stop in the patient's journey – the call center – can set the tone for the rest of the experience.

If it's positive, it can engender comfort among patients that's further supported during appointments and treatment.

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Conversely, if the caller is rushed off the phone, sent to an incorrect contact, or treated with disrespect, that can mean the end of the patient experience.

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While some call centers get it right, many leave much to be desired. For years, hospital leaders have considered the call center a cost center that they begrudgingly need – to handle complaints and low-level administrative tasks. As such, some hospitals have not invested much in them – and it shows.

At SAMC, we conducted qualitative research calling 20 hospitals, in search of care for "my father diagnosed with prostate cancer." In most cases, we were disappointed.

Staffers hung up on us, told us to go to the website, or sent us to a contact who directed us somewhere else. As consumers, we were discouraged from ever going back to 90% of the hospitals. Given that percentage, it's alarming to see how many organizations still don't see the call center's potential – and the need to repair it for their own survival.

As a corporate anthropologist, I see call centers as gateways to better branding and increased revenue.

However, call centers with ongoing problems show symptoms of a culture that hasn't adapted to the outside world – and the requirements of today's patients.

While those call centers represent a major challenge for many hospitals, it's important to remember that challenges are often opportunities in disguise. Confronted with new solutions, these challenges could ignite culture change that leads to more positive outcomes.

So if you're in a leadership position at a hospital, there are five steps you can take to help make your call center a place that not only impresses incoming callers, but also attracts new patients.

Step 1: Determine underlying issues

Before you can make larger changes, you need to diagnose not just the problems you see, but also the issues that remain hidden. That's because only 4% of disappointed customers will address an issue directly with an organization, while 96% will say nothing or complain to others, according to Customer Service Expert Ruby Newell-Legner.

So how do you get the information you really need? There's one sure way: hiring Mystery Shoppers. As Kris Baird, head of the [Baird Group](#) described in one of [SAMC's webinars](#), mystery shoppers pose as real patients and rank their patient experience based on criteria that highlights strengths and weaknesses.

These observations likely will form the basis of specific changes that hospital leaders need to make. In almost all cases, enhancing the skills and demeanor of call center staffers emerges as one of the initial issues to tackle.

Step 2: Infuse more caring

While hospitals are first and foremost dedicated to medicine and healing, it's hard to achieve that when potential patients flee before even visiting.

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Call centers need to become more focused on the needs of the person on the other end of the phone line, instead of treating him like yet another detached voice complaining about ailments or trying to make an appointment.

Compassion is key and goes a long way toward conveying a healing brand. Similar to upscale hotels that make visitors feel great about each step of their stay, hospitals have to be much more hospitable.

Of the 20 call centers we tested as self-appointed Mystery Shoppers, we found one that did everything right – largely because the call center representative was compassionate, and knew where to send us for further information. That happened with the Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA), which encourages patients to call anytime, 24/7, or participate in a live chat, or even communicate via video chat with an expert.

Step 3: Evaluate your processes & simplify

While CTCA's customer service is the gold standard that many organizations should emulate, some call centers need to walk before they can run.

One of the other common issues that surfaces via Mystery Shopping is disorganization. Considering the many mergers and acquisitions in today's healthcare space, some call centers are like puzzles with either duplicate or missing pieces.

Physicians selling their practices to join a larger entity bring their own patient lists and software with them, adding even more layers of confusion on top of systems with faulty foundations.

Matthew Henning, National Director of Health Systems for [Stericycle Communications Solutions \(SCS\)](#) knows this story all too well. He told us during our [May SAMC webinar](#) that he once helped a healthcare organization that had just purchased several practices.

Leaders of that group didn't know how many external companies ran the call center. Henning investigated and unearthed eight companies – that all used incompatible software.

The resulting chaos created countless problems, including significant loss of income to multiple vendors offering overlapping services. SCS consolidated everything under one system and immediately generated more revenue and significant savings for the hospital.

Step 4: Connect the way patients want to communicate

As you streamline your process, you also should adopt a multi-channel strategy and the technology to support it.

That said, it doesn't mean you should ignore the power of the phone, as [68 percent of consumers still use the phone to contact call centers](#).

However, emails, texts, live chats, and messages from the website are becoming more prevalent ways to communicate, especially as consumers use smartphones and tablets for everything now. In fact, a recent [Harris Poll](#) noted that 64% of consumers would prefer to use texting over voice as a customer service channel.

As Tim Pickard of [Salesforce](#) explains: "Just because a consumer usually likes to call, doesn't mean they won't open live chat while they're watching TV, or send an email if they're really busy. Contact centers need to be prepared for talking to the same customers across multiple channels, and be able to offer a seamless service however their customers choose to get in touch that day."

Since we're talking about the multi-channel world, this also means that it's more important than ever for call centers to up their game, as angry customers can spread their sentiments broadly in minutes via social media.

Negative reviews can keep patients away, before they even contact a call center, because people often check sites for reviews on hospitals and doctors. In a recent [NewVoiceMedia survey](#), 34 percent of consumers between 25 and 34 said they would actually "take revenge by posting a review online."

Step 5: Acknowledge that a call center can drive business

In this world where views of any patient with a smartphone are aired across the Internet, it's more important than ever to differentiate your brand in a positive way and build business for your hospital.

The sooner the heads of hospitals realize that the call center should be the epicenter of both branding and building the business, the sooner many call centers will improve.

Call center staffers need to know exactly what to say to reinforce the brand presented in advertising, on the main website and in other public communications. Their tone must also convey the brand – and the caring and compassion behind it. It's bad for business to forget the "care" in healthcare.

Reviewing current customer service research, it's abundantly clear that call centers are vitally important to the health of any business.

Genesys, a leading provider of software managing multi-channel customer interactions, estimates that ["businesses lose \\$289 each year for every customer who leaves due to poor service."](#) Genesys based this estimate on a global survey of several industries, including healthcare.

Given the state of many call centers, it's likely that no one really knows exactly how many potential patients have been lost over a year. But when healthcare system leaders significantly improve customer service, they often see a large boost in appointments.

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Cleveland Clinic serves as a strong example. About seven years ago, Cleveland Clinic's scheduling department was revamped and centralized.

"Since then, the rate of abandoned calls has decreased 28 percent and the scheduling error rate dropped to less than 1 percent," according to Sabrina Rodak, who summarized results in another [Becker's article](#). "In addition, physicians' utilization of scheduling templates increased 3 percent, appointment convenience increased 3 percent, and physician visits rose 12 percent."

The turnaround that has occurred with Cleveland Clinic's call center is possible for all hospital organizations if they take the right steps and invest in the best resources.

For many organizations, that journey should've started years ago. But there's no time like the present to make changes to help your patients, your physicians and the health of your own healthcare business.

And now Cleveland Clinic and the Cancer Treatment Centers of America can be trumpeted as examples of what happens when the call center is embraced as a top priority.

Andrea Simon, Ph.D., CEO and founder of Simon Associates Management Consultants, has over 20 years' experience as a senior executive with healthcare and financial services institutions. Ms. Simon's expertise lies in helping companies and non-profit institutions develop their brand positioning, redesign their organization's culture, and improve their financial performance through innovative and effective product development and marketing.

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